



Capital Circus

By MICHAEL O'NEILL

Washington, May 3.—President Kennedy and his newly chastened advisers will do very little crowing about a Communist cease-fire in Laos if it finally emerges from the present confusion. And their restraint is understandable.

They not only learned the folly of over-confidence during the late, lamented Cuban invasion fiasco. They also are painfully aware of the fact that a truce will be less a victory of American diplomacy than a temporary and probably voluntary pause in the slow but grindingly successful Communist drive into Southeast Asia.

The Lao rebels, powerfully supported by Soviet arms and "volunteers" from Communist North Viet Nam, have already grabbed more than two thirds of the remote, forested kingdom. They have reason to assume that they can gather in the rest, either at the conference table or through more political subversion. And, meanwhile, the Reds can turn their full attention to their even more threatening assault against South Viet Nam.

The somber reality is that the crisis in Laos has revealed more allied weaknesses than strengths. And one of the most glaring, in the President's private view, is the fact that the American public apparently has been unwilling to support the commitment of U. S. troops to defend so strange and distant a land.

At a critical moment in the diplomatic effort to bring about a cease-fire, both Democratic and Republican leaders in Congress sounded off against any American military intervention.

Sen. J. William Fulbright (D-Ark.), influential chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, declared: "I don't think the terrain and the conditions are right for sending our troops. We must seek another solution." Senate Democratic Leader Mike Mansfield (Mont.), Sen. Robert H. Humphrey (D-Minn.), Sen. Styles Bridges (R-N.H.) and other leaders joined in the chorus.

According to insiders, Kennedy was furious. Whether he was prepared to commit troops or not, he felt that the Congressional statements seriously undercut the whole effort to pressure the Russians and their allies into a truce.

Congress Trumped Kennedy's Ace

Practically the only lever the Administration has had in the Laotian crisis has been the threat that if Russia went too far, America and its allies would intervene in force, possibly triggering a major war. The public suggestion that Congress would refuse to back such a move yanked almost all of the teeth out of the threat.

More significantly, however, officials said the Congressional comments made it clear that Kennedy still has miles to go to mobilize the nation behind his call for a tough, new cold war strategy emphasizing the kind of dirty fighting—guerrilla warfare and counter-subversion—which the Communists have used so effectively around their Eurasian empire.

"Our greatest adversary is not the Russians," the President complained the other day in a speech. "It is our own unwillingness to do what must be done."

Kennedy and his brain-trusters are busy trying to figure out how to overcome this unwillingness. But there is no indication yet that they have come up with a solution. And one of the reasons is that the President is really groping for a radical change in American policies and attitudes which go very much against the popular grain.



Sen. J. William Fulbright
Sought "another" solution

Old A-500: What It Used to Be

He is looking for a way to make the point that the new type of American atom bomb would be the Communist's ally from gnawing at their borders' outposts in China and Southeast Asia. He is saying, in effect, that Americans have to forget about such folk customs as honoring women and go on into the villages, into the compounds and palaces, of threatened countries to fight the cold war. And it is being waged.

This kind of twilight war, where the strategy of Queen Mary's rules are out the window, has been the ally of the Communists. But Kennedy and others feel it has to be fought on the ground with world Communism. For like Britain in the 19th century, the U. S. has assumed the responsibility of policing the world and if history is any guide, that will call for ceaseless fighting all around the globe.

The British learned the fact that their responsibility required them to fight almost endlessly in every corner of the world from far-off Malaya and South Africa to the Crimea and the Near East. Fighting was such a constant in fact that no self-respecting member of Parliament would be without his stories of skirmishes in Tripoli or Rhodesia.

Light Brigade and Other British Blunders

In the process, the British committed some monumental blunders that surpass even the Cuban debacle. During the Crimean War, which was a mistake in the first place, they managed to do everything wrong, from attacking Sevastopol from the wrong direction to sending the Light Brigade immortalized by Tennyson charging into the Valley of Death because of bungled orders.

But, on the whole, the British did a good job. They were willing to make sacrifices—to lay their lives on the line—to hold their sprawling empire together around the globe. They had to wage limited wars almost continuously, but the result was that they insured general world peace for nearly a century.

The U. S., of course, is not trying to maintain an empire; it's trying to preserve the free world against the Communist world. But its peace mission is much the same. In the view of Kennedy, this means helping wage small, dirty wars in remote and difficult areas. It means sending American military experts and guerrillas into the front lines in Laos or Viet Nam where they may be killed. It means working with partly disorganized groups struggling to put through reform to win popular support.